

A Smart Future for Chester

Smart Growth Principle

1 *Maintain traditional compact settlement pattern*

Summary: Chester has no traditional compact settlement pattern and does not want one. Its overriding planning goal is to maintain “a dispersed ...semi-rural/agricultural residential community.” The issue facing the town is how best to achieve this goal.

Goals:

- Maintain the Town municipal center and preserve its character (MP p. 69).
 - Allow medium density housing in appropriate locations (MP p. 72).
 - Allow commercial activity that serves the local population (MP p. 72).
 - Preserve the intersection of Routes 102 and 121 as Chester’s governmental, civic, cultural, and institutional focal point (MP p. 72).
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Policies:

- Establishment of a commercial zone to serve the local retail and business/personal service needs of Chester (ZO p. 29).
 - Establishment of a 2-acre minimum lot size requirement for the R-1 zone that encompasses the bulk of the town (ZO p. 55).
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Analysis: Chester does not have a traditional compact settlement pattern, and its stated goal is to prevent one from developing. However, the policies designed to achieve this goal are fostering results (widespread suburban residential development) that conflict with the town’s central goal of maintaining rural character. To resolve this dilemma, Chester should consider the creation of one or two compact “village” zones. Other town policies (ZO section 5.4 Commercial District and Articles 6 & 7 Cluster Development and Incentive System for Low Moderate Housing) suggest that the Town is interested in all of the components of a village. The ingredients exist; they just haven’t been mixed creatively.

The key to adopting a “village” ordinance is to do it in combination with other ordinances designed to preserve the historic character of Chester Street, to prevent suburbanization of high priority open space areas and to allow creation of a village water/sewer system as long as it meets municipal standards.

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Foster a human scale of development

Summary: By allowing only a limited number of commercial uses (ZO 5.4.2.2), Chester discourages the “big box” form of development within the town. However, by encouraging widespread suburban residential development, it enhances demand for such commercial development elsewhere in its general region.

Goals:

- Discourage strip commercial development (MP p. 68).
 - Encourage the siting of commercial developments in designated areas (MP p. 72) and (ZO p. 55).
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Policies:

- Establishment of a commercial zone to serve the local retail and business/personal service needs of Chester (ZO p. 29).
 - Allow conversion of existing dwellings “to provide small additional rental units without adding to the number of buildings in the town....” (ZO p. 76).
 - Require 25’ buffers between commercial lots and 50’ buffer between a commercial and a residential lot. (SP p. 29)
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Analysis: Chester’s concern with “human scale” is implicit in its goal of maintaining the town’s rural character, i.e., it wants to prevent large-scale non-residential development, restrict locally oriented commercial activity to two areas and create buffers between residential and commercial activities. However, the Town’s encouragement of widespread, low-density residential development creates a dependence on the automobile which tends to run counter to “human scale” both in the demand it creates for auto friendly “big box” commercial development and in the limits it places on the human neighborhood interactions in large-scale residential developments.

Chester should consider adapting its Cluster Development ordinance to allow development of one or two mixed-use “village” type developments to allow the town to address both the continuing demand for residential housing that will remain its predominant external force and the desire to conserve open space. To do this, the town may have to adjust its “one-zone, one use” principle and change its buffer requirements between zones.

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Incorporate a mix of uses

Summary: Chester wants its mix of uses to be “a good balance of farms, residential units, parks and conservation areas” (ZO preamble). The issue is whether current policies in fact encourage this “good balance.”

Goals:

- Maintain the Town municipal center and preserve its character (MP p. 69).
 - Allow medium density housing in appropriate locations (MP p. 72).
 - Allow commercial activity that serves the local population (MP p. 72).
 - Preserve the intersection of Routes 102 and 121 as Chester’s governmental, civic, cultural, and institutional focal point (MP p. 72).
 - To preserve the scenic beauty and present aesthetic values of the Town in its openness, lack of pollution and casual nature and setting. (ZO preamble)
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Policies:

- Establishment of a commercial zone to serve the local retail and business/personal service needs of Chester (ZO p. 29).
 - Establishment of a 2-acre minimum lot size requirement for the R-1 zone that encompasses the bulk of the town (ZO p. 55).
 - Establishment of Cluster Development and Incentive System for Low Moderate Housing (ZO Articles 6 & 7)
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Analysis: Chester is satisfied with its current mix of uses: agricultural, residential, locally oriented commercial, and recreational. The challenge to the town is whether it can maintain this “good balance” in the face of the enormous and growing demand for new residential development. Looking at the past decade, one would have to say “no.” Looking to the future the question is, “Can Chester trade *some* of its open space to accommodate this demand for housing in such a way as to *ensure* preservation of some of the remaining open space. Amending its existing Cluster Development ordinance in such a way as to create a new rural, mixed-use village appears to be the best way to do just that.

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4 *Provide safety and choices in transportation*

Summary: Chester has no public transportation. Given its current land use pattern, movement is by automobile, bicycle or foot. The primary transportation issue facing Chester in the future will be whether residential development will continue to require virtually complete dependence on the automobile or whether it will include some mixed-use aspects that encourage other modes of transport.

Goals:

- Provide a safe, efficient and well-maintained road and bridge network (MP p. 68).
 - To promote the growth of the Town's infrastructure in accordance with the Master Plan and Capital Improvement Plan (ZO preamble).
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Policies:

- SD Article 5 sets street construction standards
 - SP section 7.8 enables the Planning Board to require a traffic impact analysis
 - SP sections 7.9 and 7.10 set Street, Road and Parking Standards
 - ZO Article 14 requires developments to contribute their "fair share" to the increased municipal capital expenditures they engender.
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Analysis: As a town committed to maintaining its rural character and intent on preventing any concentration of development that would "ever" create the need for a municipal water or sewer system, Chester is and intends to remain dependent on the automobile for the vast majority of its transportation. The issue for the town is to consider the priorities among its goals. Is maintaining low-density residential development with its dependence on the automobile worth the continuing capital and operational costs of building, upgrading, maintaining, plowing, mowing, busing, policing and fire protecting the roads of the town?

In the face of these costs, new developments should be required to provide both more inter-connectivity of roads to reduce traffic and development pressures on major roads and safe access for bicycles and pedestrians. In addition, Chester should consider adopting its Cluster Subdivision Ordinance to accommodate a new, mixed-use village development near the Derry line. This could include a provision for public transportation and thus provide a way of accommodating additional residential growth without greatly increasing traffic on town roads.

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Preserve the town's working landscape

Summary: No planning goal is more important, at least on paper, to Chester than preserving its working landscape and open space. At the same time no goal is more clearly threatened by the development trends of the past decade and those likely to continue over the next two decades.

Goals:

- Perpetuate and protect the right to farm. (MP p. 68).
 - Develop techniques which can help preserve for farming prime farmland and additional farmland of statewide importance (MP p. 68).
 - Encourage proper management of forests (MP p. 67).
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Policies:

- Establishment of a formal "right to farm" ordinance (ZO p. 21).
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Analysis: As is evident from the subdivision trends of the past decade, the creation of a single R-1 zone encompassing all undeveloped and working rural land has not stopped the tide of suburban residential development engulfing the town. While it has successfully prevented the creation of a municipal water/sewer system, it has not prevented an increased demand for other municipal services and consequent upward pressure on the property tax rate, nor has it prevented the loss of open space.

The reason for this failure is that creation of a single agricultural/residential zone puts open space, working agriculture and suburban residential development into direct competition. To set density and use requirements for a zone implies that development of all useable land in that zone to those standards is acceptable, or even desirable. To say that a residence may be put on **any** buildable two acres in the R-1 zone is tantamount to saying that construction of residences on **all** buildable two acres in the R-1 zone is what the ordinance envisions.

Clearly such an outcome contradicts both the "good balance" goal of the Master Plan and the desires of the participants in both Community Meetings. Creation of an open space preservation zone with much lower density requirements for residential development (10 or even 20 acres) would achieve this goal much more effectively.

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Protect the town's environmental quality

Summary: Chester has a strong commitment to maintaining the quality of its air, land, rivers, streams and ponds. The town is less sensitive to the cumulative impact on these resources of the continuing spread of low-density, suburban residential development.

Goals:

- Preserve and protect environmentally sensitive areas by discouraging those types of development which could contribute to their damage or destruction, while encouraging those uses that can be appropriately and safely located in such sensitive areas (MP p. 67).
 - Enhance the pleasant, healthful environment (ZO preamble).
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Policies:

- ZO 4.3 (Sanitary Protection), 5.5 (Flood Plain), 5.6 (Wetland Conservation) establish protected areas
 - SD 3.11, 3.12, 3.13, 4.4, 4.5, 4.6 and SP 7.4, 7.5, 7.13, 7.14 establish various performance standards guiding the process of developments.
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Analysis: As with most zoning and subdivision ordinances, those of Chester set very specific performance standards for the process of development. As long as these are followed and violations are punished, the site-specific environmental damage from development will be limited. The broader issue is the cumulative environmental impact of widespread, low-density residential development resulting from increased storm runoff even from "properly" built subdivisions, the detrimental effects of widespread use of lawn related chemicals and the impact on air quality of virtually complete dependence upon the automobile.

Studies have shown that concentrated development produces less run-off than scattered development. In addition, with a concentrated development, any run-off that is generated can be located in whatever area provides for the least impact on surface and ground waters. Also, concentrated development reduces the overall impact of development on wildlife habitat. Finally, if concentrated development is accompanied by payments to a town-wide open space preservation fund, it will protect not just land that happens to border the development (which may or may not be of a high value from the point of view of the town as a whole), but whatever land is considered of highest priority throughout the town.

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Involve the community in planning and implementation

Summary: Chester has just completed several community planning processes, one sponsored by the Cooperative Extension Service and another by the GrowSmart NH Tool-Kit Project. These exercises have stimulated much discussion about the nature of Chester and its future development. The Planning Board and other municipal officials should utilize both the information and the enthusiasm generated by these projects to jump start their efforts to revise their master plan and to initiate policies to address the problems facing the town.

Goals:

- Neither the Master Plan nor the Zoning Ordinance nor the Subdivision Ordinance nor the Site Plan Review Ordinance explicitly cites a goal of citizen involvement.
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Policies:

- SD 3.4 calls for the Planning Board to notify the public of proposed developments.
 - SP 6.3, 6.4 6.5 calls for public hearings on proposals to the Planning Board.
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Analysis: The implications of Chester's future development extend well beyond the goals currently listed in the town's planning documents. They affect traffic, air and water quality, schooling, housing costs, tax rates, the ability of current and former Chester residents to remain in or return to their hometown. These are the "in my backyard" issues that have for centuries been the hallmark of New Hampshire's civic culture of democratic involvement.

Chester's planners and other town officials should take every opportunity to bring these issues to public forums to get the best thinking of *all* town citizens. Too often Master Plans are dry compilations of data that seem of little concern to most citizens. Chester has the opportunity to set a vastly different tone for its next Master Plan, one that recognizes the importance of these issues to all citizens, explicitly refers to their contributions and seeks their ongoing participation.

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Work with neighboring towns

Summary: Chester clearly recognizes its regional setting. Its Master Plan begins with a statement of that setting. Chester's future is clearly intertwined with that of its neighbors. The question is how will those mutually dependent destinies be played out--in isolation or in cooperation.

Goals:

- Neither the Master Plan nor the Zoning Ordinance nor the Subdivision Ordinance nor the Site Plan Review Ordinance explicitly cites a goal of regional cooperation.
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Policies:

- SD 3.18 states that projects likely to have an impact beyond the town of Chester will be processed according to applicable state law.
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Analysis: Chester envisions itself as a community with a "good" balance of residential, agricultural, recreational and open spaces. While the definition of a "good" balance is quite subjective, there can be no doubt, given past and likely future growth, that the balance is swinging toward residential. This fact alone increases Chester's regional involvement. As more people live in and commute from Chester, it becomes more necessary for Chester's planners to cooperate with their colleagues in surrounding communities.

Chester should consider developing a rural village somewhere near the Derry line and meet with Derry officials to consider how cooperative efforts in the areas of public transportation, joint open space preservation and traffic management might increase the benefit of this proposal to both communities.